

An Investigation into a Newly-Discovered Scheme of 18th Century Wall-Paintings in the East Staircase at Stowe House.

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Abstract:

Following the conservation of a painted ceiling above the East Staircase at Stowe House, a limited investigative study of the cornice and walls was carried out, during which time a scheme of nationally-significant grisaille wall paintings was discovered, dating from c1740. There is no existing record of these paintings and they were believed to have been destroyed at some time between 1798 and 1820, which emphasises the need to research and record this important work.

The paintings are thought to be authored by the little-known Venetian artist, Francesco Slerer, one of the 'Rococo Venetians' who began to make their mark on English decorative painting at the turn of the 18th century. Fieldwork attempted to establish the extent of the surviving scheme as well as its composition and iconography, through cross-sectional analysis and targeted uncovering trials. An additional investigation into the architectural paint finishes within the East Staircase and upper landing helped to establish the chronological development of the space and its relationship with the adjoining landing. The discovery of this scheme of paintings not only alters our perception of the space, but also offers an increased understanding of its physical history and attribution. The study also examines the ethical and practical implications of uncovering the paintings to facilitate their conservation.

Stowe House and the Architectural Development of the East Staircase

Stowe House is a Grade I listed building, located 4km north-west of Buckingham, has a complex architectural history. The Stowe estate was acquired by the Temple family in 1589, however, it was not until the late 17th century that a house was built by Sir Richard Temple (3rd Baronet) to the designs of William Cleare on the present site between 1677 and 1683 [Bevington, 2002, p11]. This brick structure was four floors high and thirteen bays in length, and forms the core of the building as it stands today (see figures 1 and 2).

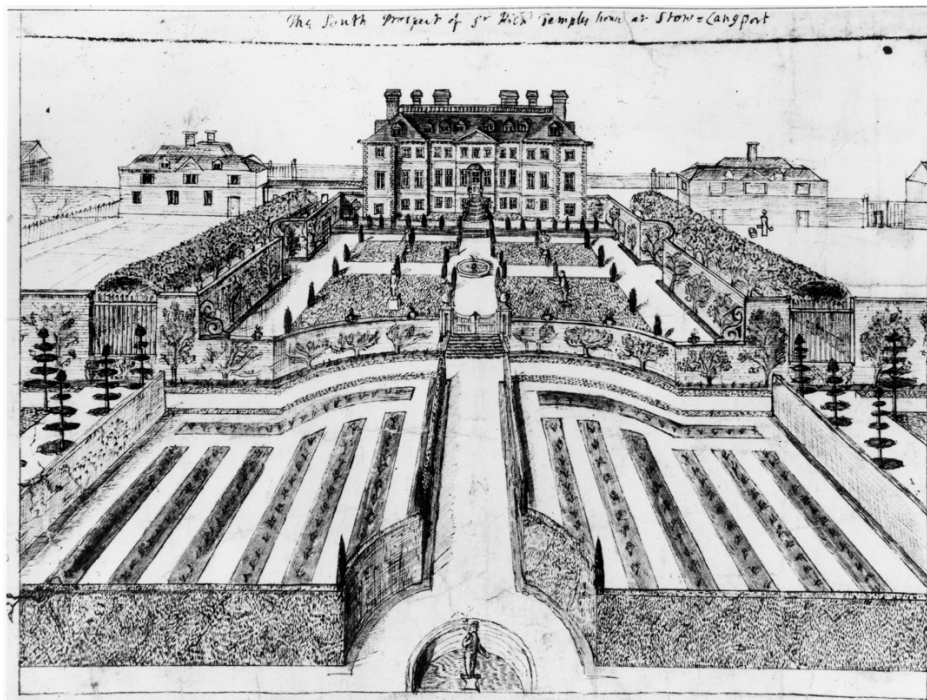


Figure 1: Engraving of the South Front of Stowe House as built c1683 (photograph courtesy Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England – permission to reproduce is being sought)

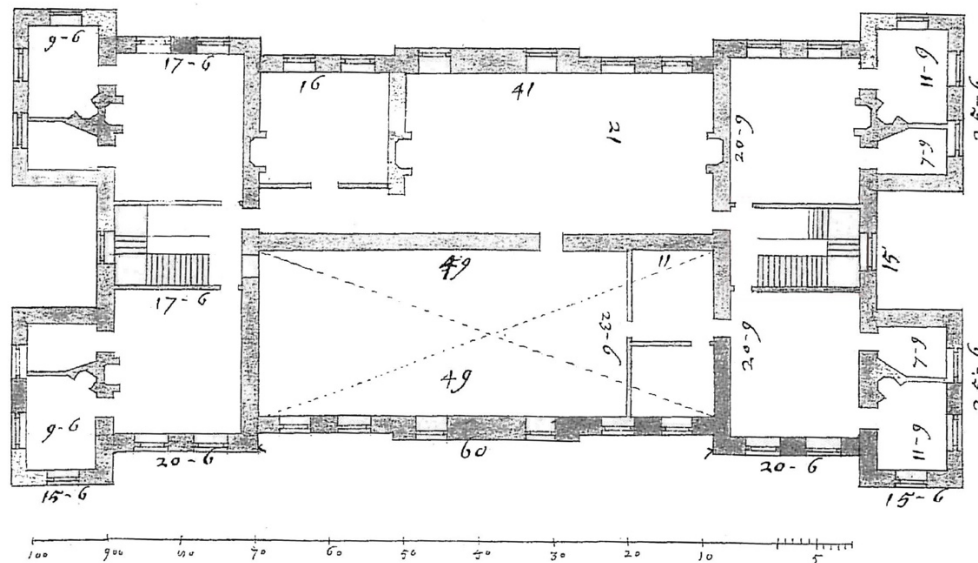


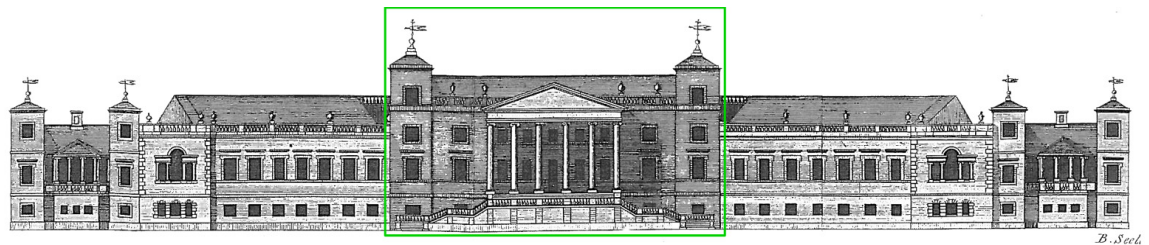
Figure 2: Late 17th century floor plan of Stowe House, reproduced with permission from the Huntington Library (source Stowe House Preservation Trust).

In 1697, the house was inherited by Sir Richard Temple (4th Baronet), and it was during his tenure that the house underwent some of its most significant alterations in the grand style. Between 1720 and 1733, major alterations to the house were made by Vanburgh. These works also included the enlargement of the North Hall and the creation of a spacious dining room [Bevington 2002, p11]. After Vanburgh's death in 1726 the work continued under William Kent, who was working on a number of designs for structures and temples in the garden in the neo-Palladian style. The North, East and West sides of the house had also been extensively rebuilt by 1733 [Bevington, 2002, p12].

The Western and Eastern state apartments were extended around c1740. An archaeological investigation¹ in the East corridor confirmed that the east staircase was previously located to the west end of the east corridor, and when the external wall was moved east-wards, the existing staircase was removed and a stone cantilever staircase was constructed in its current position (see figures 3 and 4). Despite the East and West staircases being symmetrical in design and their relative modesty today, from 1762 the East stair was referred to as the Grand Staircase, alluding to a greater significance or elevated status.



Figure 3: An image showing the original position of the staircase beneath the floor in the East Corridor ©TJC Heritage Ltd 2015, reproduced with permission.



A Plan of the Principal Floor, and the Elevation of the Garden Front of Stowe House.

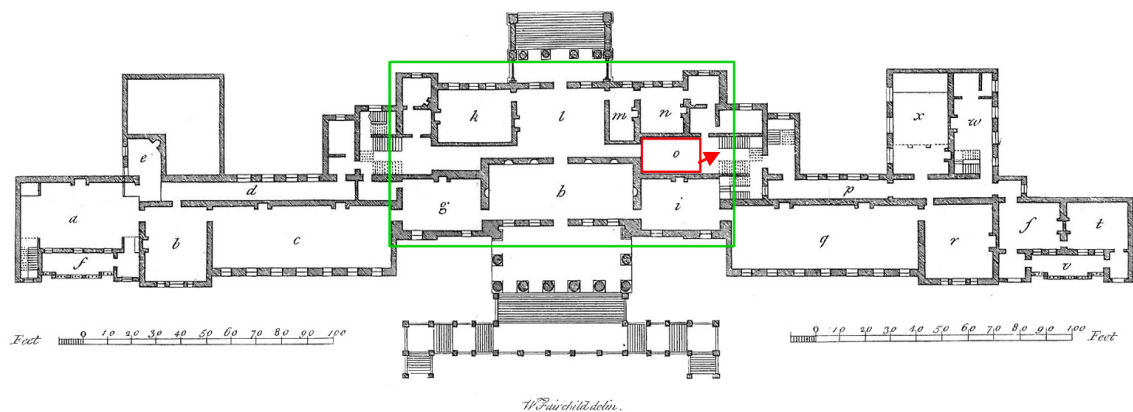


Figure 4: Plan and elevation of the principal floor of Stowe House from Seeley guidebook c1766 (source Stowe House Preservation Trust). The red box indicates the earlier position of the staircase relative to the existing cantilevered staircase).

The East staircase as it stands today rises to the second floor from the East corridor, with the large rectangular allegory of *Fame and Victory* to the West end over the staircase, which is painted in oil on plaster and is rich in colour (see figure 5). It was painted by Francesco Sletter (1685-1775), a Venetian artist who lived and worked in England from an early age. In contrast, the smaller ceiling above the upper landing is decorated with trompe l'oeil in brunaille/grisaille technique, although the central circular composition is missing and unrecorded (see figure 6).



Figure 5: General view of the East Staircase and the *Fame and Victory* ceiling above, before conservation © Hirst Conservation Ltd, 2016.



Figure 6: A general view of the upper landing and the trompe l'oeil ceiling above © Hirst Conservation Ltd.

The varying appearance of the adjacent ceilings against the plain, off-white backdrop of the walls and cornice, make the compositions visually discordant. It is not known with certainty who painted

the ceiling above the landing, nor if it is coeval with the Sleter ceiling painting c1740, and it has been suggested by Bevington that the trompe l'oeil ceiling could be a remnant of Kent's earlier fabric, framing the earlier staircase to the West end of the East corridor.

Stowe House represents Sleter's last recorded and most significant body of work, having worked there between 1731 and 1747 on a number of paintings within the house and gardens for Viscount Cobham. In his 18th century guidebooks for Stowe, Benton Seeley describes the grand staircase as being 'ornamented with ironwork', and refers to 'three paintings by Francesco Sleter, *Fame and Victory*, which survives on the ceiling above the staircase, and two others, *Constancy and Plenty* and *Justice and Peace*', although the positions of these pieces were not noted. The walls were described as being 'adorned with 'war-like' pieces' [Seeley 1763, p5]. Such iconographic themes were likely chosen by Cobham to reflect his extensive military and political careers.

Despite the Temple-Grenville family's riches, the bankruptcy of the 2nd Duke in the early 19th century - the greatest debtor in the world at that time - led to a major auction of the house contents in 1848, and he left to live in London before his wife divorced him, and remained there until his death [Bevington 2002, p19]. Despite the 3rd Duke's best efforts to revive the fortunes of the family, he died suddenly in 1889. His daughter, Lady Kinloss attempted to sell the house upon inheriting it, but as no buyer could be found she let the house to the Comte de Paris. When he died in 1894 the house lay empty once more, before Lady Kinloss moved back to Stowe in 1901. Her eldest son then inherited Stowe in 1908, but he was killed during the Great War in 1914, and his brother did not have the inclination or wealth needed to run such a large estate, and it was sold in 1921 [Bevington 2002, p20]. By this time the house had fallen into a state of disrepair and was at risk from demolition following its return to auction in 1922, but this fate was avoided due to the formation of Stowe School.

Preliminary Architectural Paint Research in the East Staircase

Following a project to conserve Sleter's surviving ceiling painting *Fame and Victory* over the East staircase, scaffold access provided a rare opportunity to assess the condition of the block modillion cornice and to conduct some preliminary architectural paint research. The aim of this was to record the paint archaeology and establish the decorative history of the cornice, as well as to develop a conservation strategy. Sampling was initially confined to the upper cornice, but this was later extended to include the frieze and the lower architrave.

Cross sectional analysis and limited uncovering indicated that there were up to six schemes of decoration to the cornice, and the continuation of the ground layer from the ceiling onto the cornice suggested that the first scheme of decoration to the cornice was contemporaneous with the Sleter ceiling (see figure 7). The finishes to the cornice frieze and the wall beneath required further investigation, as the first scheme in these samples had less consistency and a more complex layer structure, comprising up to five paint layers. In all of the samples, the secondary scheme was a stone-coloured oil paint, applied consistently across the cornice, architrave and frieze. The first four decorative schemes were painted with lead-based oil paints, whereas the fifth and sixth schemes had been executed in alkyd paints containing titanium white, which most likely dated from the mid-20th century onwards.

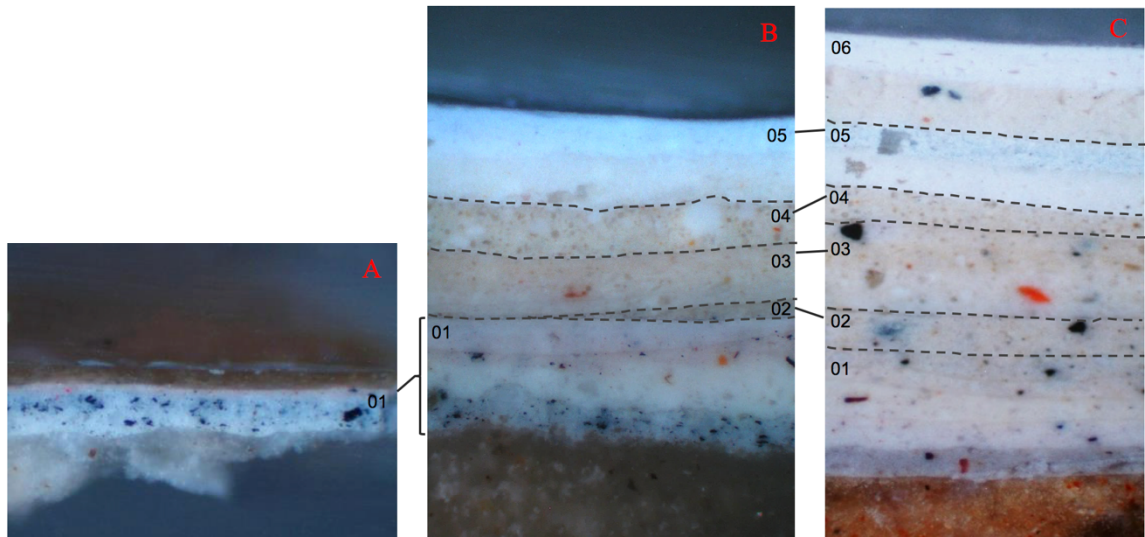


Figure 7: Cross section from A) the Fame & Victory ceiling, B) the upper cornice above the staircase and C) the cornice frieze, at x100 magnification. Note the sequence of decorative schemes and that the ground layer beneath the painted ceiling extends onto the cornice. © Hirst Conservation Ltd, 2016.

The Rediscovery of the Wall Paintings at Stowe House

The first indications that there might be painterly decoration to the cornice frieze was discovered on 20th July 2016, when raised outlines of foliate designs were seen in raking light during cleaning. Authorisation was given to investigate, and a section of a foliate scroll in the grisaille technique was revealed (see figure 8), which bore a striking resemblance to the foliate motifs seen to the trompe l'oeil ceiling above the upper landing, thereby strengthening the connection between the two, currently disparate spaces.

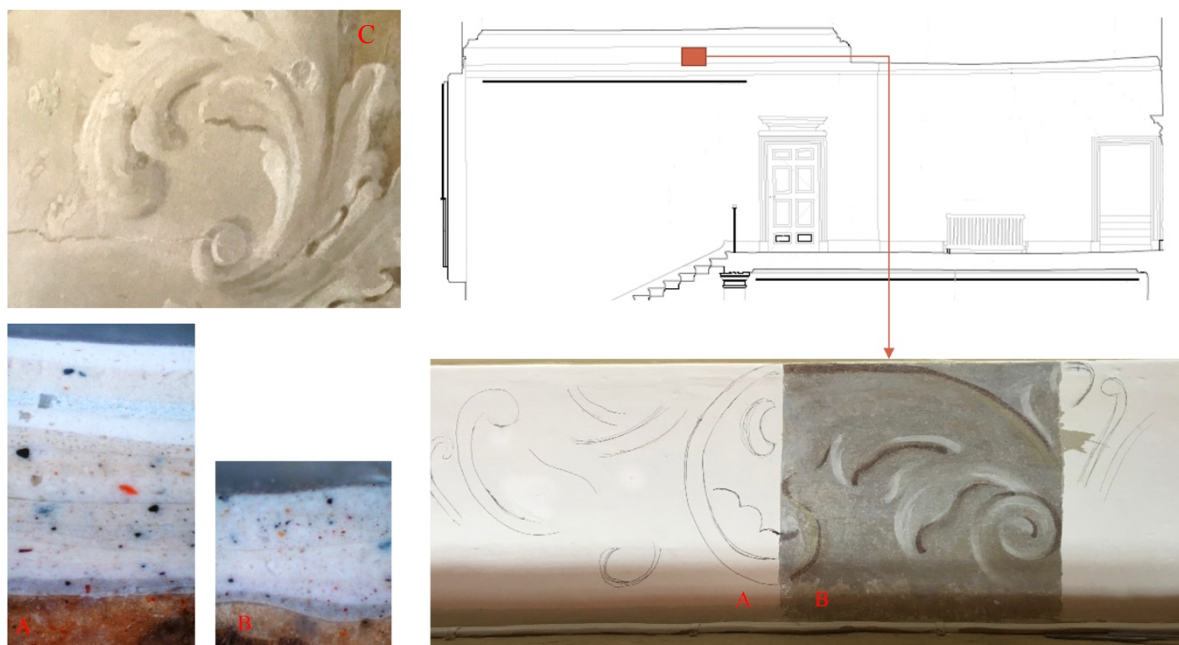


Figure 8: A photograph of a section of foliate scroll revealed in the cornice frieze on the South wall of the staircase, with its location indicated on the elevation drawing. Photomicrograph A is taken from the cornice frieze and represents the full paint archaeology, whereas sample B is taken from the exposed section of wall painting, showing the relative complexity of the primary scheme. Photograph C is a detail of the foliate scroll from the trompe l'oeil ceiling above the upper landing © Hirst Conservation Ltd, 2016. Architectural drawings supplied by Purcell, architects to Stowe House Preservation Trust

Further to the initial discovery, a more robust phase of investigation was carried out, to establish the extent of the painted decoration and its likely composition.ⁱⁱ Using a raking light, the walls were examined and pencils were used to mark out the composition, where visible. Similar outlines were evident across the walls from skirting level up to cornice height, from the upper landing, down through the staircase and terminating at the pilaster at the foot of the stairs, suggesting the presence of a series of painted niches, cartouches, overdoor panels, architectural pediments and ashlar block-work (see figures 9 and 10). Interestingly, the position of the wall paintings in relation to the doors suggested that some of the door openings are later.



Figure 9: An illustration showing the approximate layout of the composition to the North wall © Hirst Conservation Ltd. Architectural drawings supplied by Purcell, architects to Stowe House Preservation Trust



Figure 10: An illustration showing the approximate layout of the composition to the South wall. © Hirst Conservation Ltd. Architectural drawings supplied by Purcell, architects to Stowe House Preservation Trust

Although the brush strokes of strong horizontal and vertical lines were quite clear, the surface texture of the wall made it very difficult to interpret some passages. Following discussion, it was

agreed that several small windows of uncovering should be carried out to confirm the presence and nature of significant decoration to the upper landing, staircase and East corridor.

A two-stage mechanical process using scalpels enabled the painstaking removal of the layers of overpaint. The first tantalising find was the location of architectural detailing of a niche on the south wall of the upper landing (figure 11), followed by what appears to be a shaft of a pole to the south wall of the staircase (figure 12) and a figure within a niche on the north wall of the upper landing (figure 13).

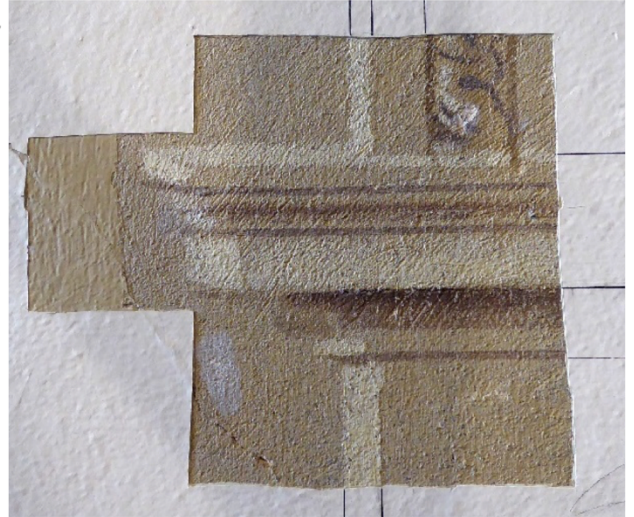
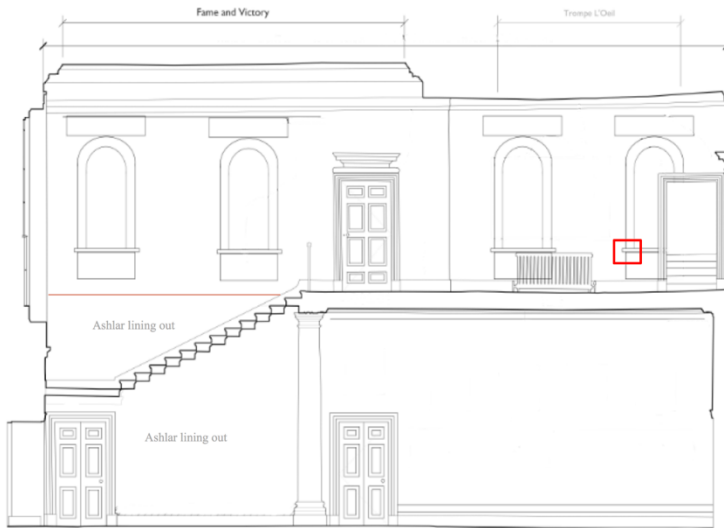


Figure 11: (above right) The revealed section of trompe l'oeil architectural detailing and (above left) an illustration indicating its location on the South wall of the upper landing (not to scale). © Hirst Conservation Ltd. Architectural drawings supplied by Purcell, architects to Stowe House Preservation Trust

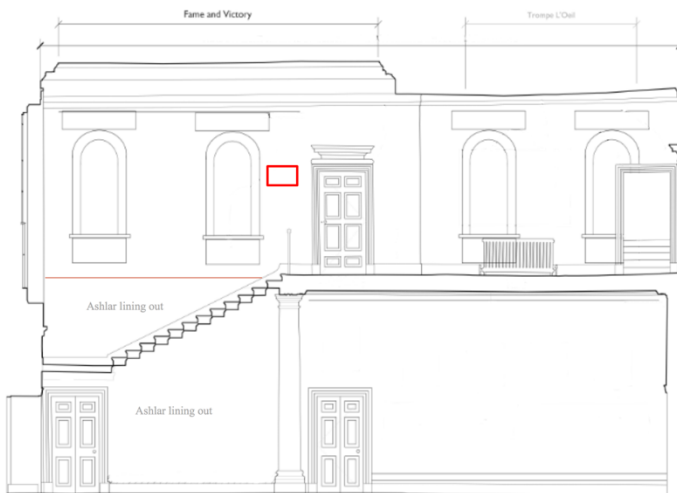


Figure 12: (above right) The revealed section of trompe l'oeil painting, possibly the shaft of a pole, and (above left) an illustration indicating its location on the South wall of the East Staircase (not to scale). © Hirst Conservation Ltd. Architectural drawings supplied by Purcell, architects to Stowe House Preservation Trust

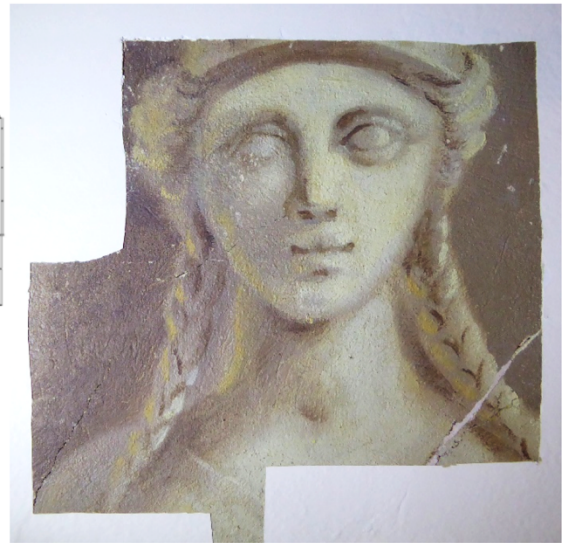


Figure 13: (above right) A section of trompe l'oeil painting within the outline of the niche, depicting a female figure, and (above left) an illustration indicating its location on the North wall of the upper landing (not to scale). © Hirst Conservation Ltd. Architectural drawings supplied by Purcell, architects to Stowe House Preservation Trust

Further Investigation into the Wall Paintings and Subsequent Decorative Schemes

With the discovery of the large expanse of seemingly near-complete wall paintings, a feasibility study was commissioned. This began with a more in-depth analysis of the subsequent finishes to the walls, to establish whether they were of any significance in themselves, which would be vital if the scheme of wall paintings were to be uncovered. To establish this, a tract of each scheme of decoration was carefully exposed using scalpels and solvents, where appropriate, in conjunction with cross sectional analysis (figure 14).

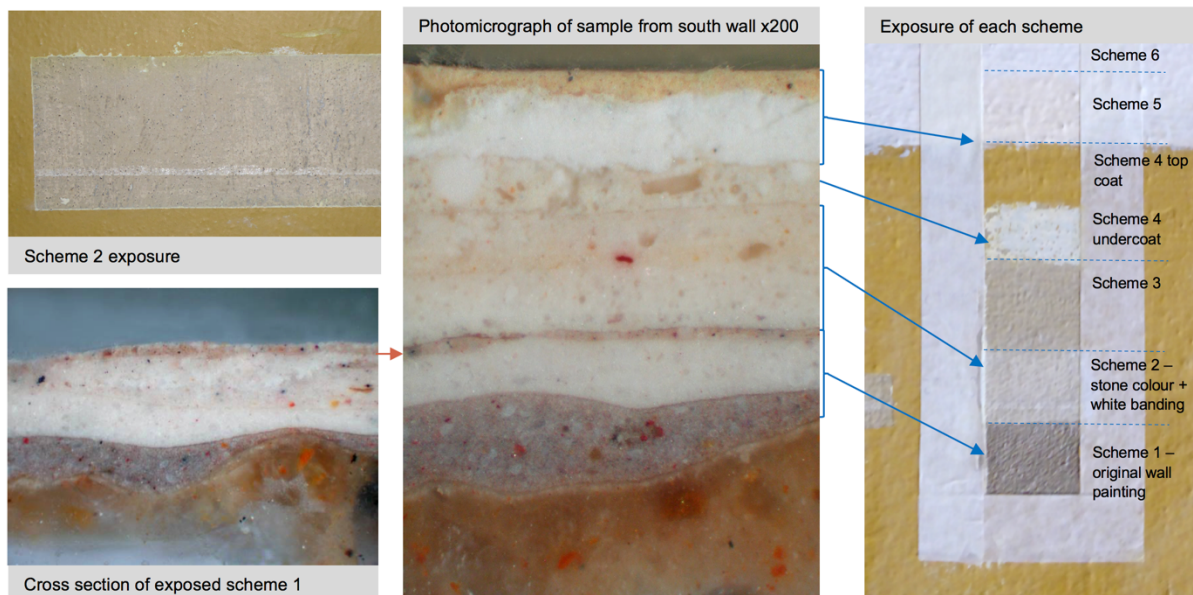


Figure 14: (above right) An exposure of each of the decorative schemes to the South wall of the upper landing compared to a cross section of the full paint archaeology (above centre) and to a cross section from the exposed wall painting (above, lower left). A larger exposure of the second scheme showed thin white banding on a stone colour base coat, perhaps indicative of stylised ashlar block work or rustication © Hirst Conservation Ltd, 2016.

Investigations confirmed that all of the later decorative schemes were plain with the exception of the second scheme, which was a pale, stone colour on a white undercoat, with thin, white, horizontal banding. Further investigation of the secondary scheme found a total of four horizontal lines, the full width of the North wall, spaced approximately 19 inches apart. It was unclear whether these horizontal lines may have been applied to imitate ashlar block work, however there was no evidence of any staggered or regular vertical lines. These lines terminated at the doorway to the boys' dormitory, and may have possibly been applied following the insertion of the later doorway, which disturbed the original composition to the walls. Whilst further investigation of the secondary scheme could be considered, it is felt that sufficient information has been gathered about it and, whilst not completely plain, it is repetitive in nature and deemed to be of considerably less significance than the primary scheme beneath, and its removal could be considered if the scheme of wall paintings were to be fully exposed.

In an attempt to better appraise the significance and condition of the wall paintings and to assess the feasibility of uncovering on a wider scale, a section of the painting, approximately 1msq in area, was uncovered (see figure 15). This exposure revealed a larger than life-sized figure, possibly of Minerva, standing in a niche, wearing a helmet, with her long hair tied in two braids. She carries a shield on her left arm and is holding what appears to be a staff or spear by her right side. Although she is the Roman goddess of wisdom, Minerva's iconographic association with strategic warfare and her military dress may have contributed to the description of the walls being adorned with 'war-like' pieces.



Figure 15: The 1sqm uncovering of the figure of Minerva in a fictive niche on the North wall of the upper landing © Hirst Conservation Ltd, 2016

The uncovering technique was slow but effective, although, depending on the texture of the plaster substrate, some areas of over-paint were much easier to remove than others. The condition of the paintings beneath is generally very good, with very little evidence of abrasion, dirt or past intervention. There are a number of small holes evident on the surface of the painting, at

approximately the same height, some of which were filled with rawl plugs, which are as a result of pictures being hung on the walls. Some of these holes were not evident prior to uncovering as they were defunct fittings that had been filled and decorated over. Two large diagonal cracks were also revealed during the course of uncovering, which were not previously apparent, as they had been repeatedly filled and scraped back prior to each subsequent scheme of redecoration, masking the true condition beneath. The cracks are likely to be as a result of settlement and appear to correspond with cracking seen to the other side of the wall.

Understanding the Relationship Between the East Staircase and the Upper Landing

The discovery of this scheme of wall paintings re-establishes the elevated significance of this space and also aides our understanding of how the two spaces interrelate. Prior to the discovery of the wall paintings it was not known with certainty who painted the ceiling above the landing, nor if it was coeval with the Sleter ceiling painting c1740, and it had been suggested by Bevington that the trompe l'oeil ceiling could be a remnant of Kent's fabric, framing the earlier staircase. However, comparative cross-sectional analysis of the wall paintings either side of the old external east wall and in the east corridor below, revealed a very similar stratigraphy. This suggested that at the time of the extension to the east wing, the entire space was re-plastered and painted with a cohesive scheme of wall paintings. It is not thought that any of the earlier fabric by Kent survives here.

The need for further architectural paint research was identified to help clarify the development of the space and to confirm that the fabric of the upper landing and staircase was coeval, and to establish whether any evidence survived from the earlier east staircase, located at the west end of the east corridor.

Attribution and Drawing Parallels

Even if the wall paintings are known to be contemporaneous with the ceiling painting by Sleter, there is no firm attribution for the wall paintings, other than Seeley's 18th century description, although Sleter is the most likely as he had numerous commissions throughout the house and garden buildings at Stowe. Furthermore, the stylistic similarities to another of Sleter's known commissions at the Parish church of St Lawrence, Little Stanmore are striking (figure 15), and hints at the splendour that might once have adorned the walls of the East staircase at Stowe.

This church, dating to c1360, was almost entirely rebuilt in 1715 by James Brydges, the 1st Duke of Chandos, following his purchase of the nearby Cannons estate [Pevsner, 1951, pp146-148]. He engaged fashionable artists of the time to decorate the interior of the church at the same time as the interior of Cannons House, which was razed in 1747. The ceiling of the Nave was painted in polychrome by Louis Laguerre, and paintings of the Nativity and Pieta, either side of the altar, are attributed to Antonio Bellucci. The Duke of Chandos's Mausoleum, designed by James Gibbs, was built next to the church in 1735, and the monochrome trompe l'oeil paintings to the walls and ceiling there are attributed to Gaetano Brunetti.

The walls of the Nave at St Lawrence church are covered with grisaille paintings of the Evangelists and fictive trompe l'oeil paintings of statues of the cardinal virtues in a series of niches, which date to c1736 (figures 16 and 17). The Nave walls were previously attributed to Laguerre, but have since been reattributed to Sleter, possibly in collaboration with Brunetti, due to similarities between them and the inset grisaille paintings at Moor Park [Croft-Murray, p279].



Figure 16: A comparison between the figure of Minerva found at Stowe (above right) and the grisaille painting of Hope at St Lawrence Church by Sleter (above left) © London churches in Photographs and Hirst Conservation, 2016. Note the similarities between the niches and modelling.



Figure 17: The North Nave wall at the Parish church of St Lawrence, Little Stanmore, with grisaille paintings by Sleter © London Churches in Photographs

It is possible that Brunetti may have had a hand in the paintings at Stowe, although a lack of archival evidence and the fact that he moved to Paris in 1739 due to financial difficulties [Croft-Murray, page 176] may preclude this. One might also speculate that the historic appearance of the ceiling above the upper landing may have been similar to the ceiling of the Chandos Mausoleum, which comprises a trompe l'oeil dome surrounded by painted quadratura (see figure 18). Equally, the central oculus could have been filled with one of Sleter's missing allegorical paintings of *Justice and Peace* or *Plenty and Constancy*.



Figure 18: (above left) The trompe l'oeil ceiling above the upper landing at Stowe with its missing central composition, compared to the ceiling of the Chandos Mausoleum at the Parish church of St Lawrence, Little Stanmore by Brunetti (above right) © ipernity 2015

Why Were the Paintings Covered Over?

The reason for the destruction of this cycle of wall paintings is not clear, especially as they appear to have been obliterated within 60 years or so of being painted. Whilst deemed to be of high significance today, the grand Baroque schemes by British mural painters and continental artists working in England in the late 17th and early 18th century fell out of favour, and changing tastes and fashions of interior decoration lead to the over-painting or destruction of many such schemes. The fact that mural paintings have often been deemed as being artistically inferior to other forms of painting may be another reason that the wall paintings were lost, yet the ceiling paintings were retained.

The date when these paintings may have been destroyed is not clear, but references to the paintings in the grand staircase cease sometime between 1798 and 1820, after which point Seeley lists only an exhaustive number of portraits hanging on the walls, suggesting that the walls were plainly painted by this time. It is a possibility that one of the missing ceiling compositions could have been located in the central roundel above the upper landing and the other to the ceiling of the East corridor on the ground floor.

An alternative theory is that remodelling works of the 1770s, by the second Earl Temple, may have compromised the composition to such an extent that it required the paintings to be covered over. During the investigations on site, the position of the wall paintings in relation to the doors suggests that the door openings on the half landing of the stairs and another on the upper landing leading to the boys' dormitories, are later, as they intersect a fictive frame and niche. At this stage, however, it is not known at what date these doorways were inserted, nor if the door was inserted after the wall paintings had already been obscured.

Conclusion: Ethical Considerations for Uncovering the Paintings

Having made the discovery of this significant scheme of late Baroque wall paintings, a decision must be made about how to proceed, and there are a number of approaches to consider: i) to leave them covered over, ii) partial uncovering or iii) full uncovering, and Table 1 lists the various benefits and risks to each approach.

The benefits of leaving the paintings covered is that it may be damaging or prohibitively expensive to uncover them fully. Furthermore, they appear to be stable and are protected by the overpaint to a certain degree. However, the historical importance of this space may be lost or undervalued, and we may never fully understand the artist's vision for the space. In addition, being hidden, they are vulnerable to inadvertent loss or damage, and over time the characteristics of the overpaint and its relationship with the primary scheme may alter and the ability to uncover them may diminish.

Alternatively, consideration could be given to uncovering a larger tract of the wall painting, to attract funds for conservation. A window could be left exposed so that a portion of the painting can remain in view within the context of the room. This way, areas that are found to be too vulnerable to uncover, if any, could be left covered over. However, partial uncovering of features as a long-term option is not recommended as covered and uncovered sections will age differentially, and, in isolation, a window of uncovered painting may be difficult for visitors to interpret and the scheme of paintings will lose their original iconographic context.

Lastly, full uncovering might be considered as this is a significant find that brings greater understanding and coherence to the space. The scheme of paintings appears to be in excellent condition and near complete, and the overpaint can be removed safely from the wall paintings to the upper landing, with no obvious signs of damage. There is also a great deal of potential for research, and its study would contribute to the body of knowledge about the artist and decorative finishes in Britain at that time, an area which remains relatively poorly documented and largely misunderstood. Finally, with the greater historic, artistic and aesthetic value placed on a scheme of figurative wall paintings, it is likely to safeguard the fabric in the long term and may help to secure funding.

However, as the space is currently used as a school common room, the use of the space may need to be reconsidered as, once uncovered, the paintings may be vulnerable to damage by way of fading, accumulation of dirt or physical impact, as well as for the safeguarding of the children if the visitor route were to change. Finally, the original composition has been compromised by the insertion of new doors, although this contributes to our understanding of the architectural development of the space.

Word count: 3,434 (not including abstract, figure captions, bibliography etc.)

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Biography:

Rhiannon Clarricoates is now a Senior Research Fellow in Conservation and Heritage, at the School of History and Heritage, College of Arts at the University of Lincoln. Rhiannon is an accredited easel paintings conservator and architectural paint researcher, who has 13 years' experience of conservation of fine art in an architectural setting and the conservation of historic interiors. The project at Stowe House outlined in this article was conducted by Rhiannon and her colleagues when she worked for Hirst Conservation, but she continues to research the topic of Francesco Sileter and his commissions for her PhD.

An active member of the conservation community, Rhiannon has been secretary and a committee member of the Institute of Conservation's Paintings Group for the last 10 years. Through her work with the committee she has helped to organise a number of high profile international conferences, and has co-edited three sets of post-prints published through Archetype Publications. Rhiannon has recently qualified as an assessor for the Conservation and Collections Care Technician's diploma, a new work-based qualification being offered by the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Institute of Conservation.

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ⁱ Carried out by the by the Jessop Consultancy Ltd in 2015.

ⁱⁱ Fieldwork undertaken by the author and colleagues Amanda White and Lucyna Kaszewska, whilst employed by Hirst Conservation Ltd in 2016 and 2017.